



## CHAPTER 3

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# What Is the Connection between Inequalities and Radicalisation?

## *Reviewing the Evidence Base*

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### Introduction

There is a widespread presumption – found in public opinion (Bentley, Lekalake and Buchanan-Clarke 2016; Coolsaet 2017) as well as among policy and practice experts in the field of countering violent extremism – that inequality is a key driver of radicalisation. The evidence from empirical studies, however, suggests that the relationship between inequality and radicalisation is not so straightforward. A number of published synthesis studies in the field of radicalisation and terrorism have been unable to draw definitive conclusions about the role of inequality or have come to different conclusions (e.g. Campana and Lapointe 2012; Meierrieks 2014; Desmarais et al. 2017; Lösel et al. 2018). In relation to radicalisation, for instance, Munton et al. (2011: 13) identified perceived inequality (grievances, frustration with limited socio-economic opportunities) as a consistent motivating factor for Al Qaeda-influenced violent extremism. On the other hand, Christmann (2012: 26) concludes that relative deprivation and failed integration are likely to be ‘only, at best, a background or distal factor (the cause of the causes) in any process of radicalisation, and then not a necessary one’.

Scoping existing synthesis studies revealed that systematic reviews to date included quantitative studies alone and that these syntheses of quantitative findings often conflated results across outcomes of radicalisation (i.e. radicalised opinions *and* radicalised behaviours) (see McCauley and

Moskalenko 2017) or across ideologies. In some cases, the reviews also covered only some dimensions of inequality. In designing the syntheses on which this contribution is based, therefore, we sought to undertake the first meta-ethnographic synthesis (MES) of qualitative studies on the inequality-radicalisation relationship, alongside a systematic review (SR) of quantitative findings. This parallel study, we proposed, would allow us to acknowledge the distinct strengths and limitations of both approaches and integrate our findings to produce a deeper and more complex understanding of the inequality-radicalisation relationship. This integration was facilitated by using a similar and complex conceptualisation of radicalisation and inequality for each of the syntheses. Radicalisation was understood as a relational process shaped by context and ideological orientation. Inequality was understood as: manifested at both individual and social levels; existing objectively and subjectively; and taking economic and social-political forms.

## Method

The inclusion/exclusion criteria, search strategy and limitations of the two syntheses conducted are outlined below. Further details of the procedures (and results) can be found in Franc and Pavlović (2018, 2021) and Poli and Arun (2019, 2021).

### *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Studies included in the reviews had to be empirical (quantitative, qualitative or mixed-method) and relevant to both inequality and radicalisation. We limited the search to publications (journal articles, books, book chapters or reports) in English that were published between 1 January 2001 and 31 December 2017 and focused on terrorism or Islamist and/or extreme-right radicalisation. The starting date reflects the year in which the concept of 'radicalisation' began to appear more often in the literature (Neumann and Kleinmann 2013). We included studies regardless of whether they employed primary or secondary data, their research design and approaches to data collection, analytical procedures or geographical context of the data analysed. No limitations regarding age, gender, ethnicity or nationality were imposed. Finally, relevant populations of the studies published included terrorist or radicalised groups, states or other aggregate units (in the case of quantitative terrorism studies) alongside individuals.

### ***Search Strategy***

The search strategy was founded on the central concepts (inequality and radicalisation) as understood and interpreted within the DARE project (DARE 2016; see also Franc and Pavlović 2018; Poli and Arun 2019). A search was conducted of seven databases (Web of Science Core Collection – excluding Chemical Indexes; SCOPUS; Current Contents® – Social & Behavioral Sciences; SocINDEX – full texts; PsychINFO; EconLit – EBSCO; and MEDLINE®), with the additional hand-search of two journals (*Journal for Deradicalization* and *Perspectives on Terrorism*) and a grey literature search. The initial search identified 5,511 manuscripts. After several rounds of screening and eligibility checks, cross-referencing and expert advice,<sup>1</sup> our final data set consisted of 141 publications based on quantitative and mixed studies and ninety-four publications based on qualitative and mixed studies.

Of the 141 publications presenting quantitative findings, forty-two were based on surveys among non-radicalised individuals, fifteen on biographical evidence from radicalised individuals and eighty-four on analyses of terrorism data. Within the SR, we differentiated between: (1) level of investigation: individual (indicators such as income, education level, (un)employment etc.) or societal (indicators such as national GDP or poverty rate); (2) type and ideological base of radicalisation (cognitive or behavioural, Islamist or extreme-right, international or domestic terrorism); (3) type of inequality: economic or socio-political, and its objective/measurable or subjective/perceived basis.

Of the ninety-four publications presenting qualitative findings, seventy focused on Islamist radicalisation, and twenty-four focused on extreme-right, racist or anti-Islamic radicalisation. The MES generated interpretive explanations of the relationship between inequality and radicalisation derived from synthesising the findings of multiple empirical studies. The assessed studies varied in terms of geographic location and in the profiles of interviewees included.

### ***Main Limitations***

Both reviews were limited by the search criteria, which failed to reach all available databases as well as texts in languages other than English. Furthermore, we did not discriminate between studies with respect to quality, given that all texts identified were already cited and are used in forming policies. Therefore, in deciding between maximising the breadth of the evidence base or restricting inclusion in order to ensure the highest quality of studies, we opted for the former, whilst acknowledging that

excluding studies with a less rigorous methodological approach might have led to more consistent findings.

## Results

In view of the different methodologies used in the frame of the MES and the SR, we have chosen to present the results in a successive manner. This highlights the range of approaches and concepts and the specific emphases that emerge from each type of synthesis. In the Conclusion, we combine the findings to provide general insights and a more complex understanding of the relationships between inequalities and radicalisation.

### **Configurations of the Relationship between Inequality, Injustice and Radicalisation: The Meta-Ethnographic Synthesis**

In the MES, three main interpretations of the relationship between inequality and radicalisation were identified: direct, indirect and 'contested'. Those studies identifying a direct relationship suggested that structural inequality (such as belonging to a disadvantaged group, class, district, country), but also perceived inequality, are directly connected to the process of radicalisation. Where an indirect relationship was posited, the studies identified a series of other factors, drivers or variables that mediate the link between inequality and radicalisation. In those cases where indirect links only are established, the authors point to the absence of consistent inequality-radicalisation relationships and the complex nature of the relationship. Finally, a third interpretation emerges from refutational studies, which suggest a lack of relationship between inequality and radicalisation. In all cases, attention should be paid to the direction of the relationship since inequality may be understood as a root cause of radicalisation but also as a consequence of it.

#### ***Decentring Ideology: Inequality and Social Injustice as the Bedrock of Radicalisation***

Two main lines of argument posit a direct relationship between inequality and radicalisation. In the first case, this pertains to structural inequality while, in the second, to subjective inequality (perceived injustice).

A number of studies suggested that poor socio-economic conditions – rather than ideology or religion – lie at the root of radicalisation into vio-

lent extremism associated with Islam (Christensen 2015; Ahmed 2016). Such 'conditions' included high unemployment (or under-employment), permanent dependence on state welfare, an inadequate public health care system, a poor school system and poor social mobility due to an intractable class system (Boukhars and Amar 2011; Shetret, Schwartz and Cotter 2013; Coolsaet 2017). In some texts, a direct relationship between inequality and radicalisation is suggested through the depiction of radicalised individuals' backgrounds, even though this does not result in a sustained argument by the author about the relationship between inequality and radicalisation (Hegghammer 2010; Aasgaard 2017; Azam and Fatima 2017). Radicalisation into extreme-right movements is also associated by some authors with social problems – understood as a real situation or a feeling of being excluded – rather than ideology alone (Christensen 2015; Busher 2016; Pilkington 2016). Thus, although individuals themselves rarely connect their material circumstances with their trajectory into extreme-right activism (Pilkington 2016: 85), those circumstances – of being out of work, in low-income jobs or earning a living through precarious and semi-legal activities – remain an important context for understanding life decisions.

The relationship between inequality (coming from a lower or lower middle-class socio-economic background, poverty or deprivation) and radicalisation is a common feature of radicalised people in the different studies. However, the nature of qualitative research – with its relatively small samples and often inductively driven research questions – means that direct relationships between structurally rooted socio-economic conditions (at individual or societal level) and radicalisation are difficult to test, model or generalise.

Another important illustration of the direct link between radicalisation and inequality refers more explicitly to the subjectivity of radicalised individuals. Here the relationship between perceived injustice and radicalisation differs, depending on whether the study deals with extreme-right or Islamist radicalisation.

In relation to the extreme right, while social inequality experienced by activists is not objectively proven, studies show that activists perceive themselves to be unjustly treated while preferential treatment is given to 'others'. In such cases, perceived inequality gives rise to grievance, which fuels radicalisation (on the nature and role of 'grievance', see Pilkington and Vestel, this volume). The feeling of having received 'unjust treatment' by authorities is one of the main frames of thought identified among supporters and activists in different countries (De Koster and Houtman 2008; Klandermans and Mayer 2009; Rhodes 2011; Pilkington 2016). Activism provides a mechanism for resisting this perceived second-

class status (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler 2011: 174) through a discursive reordering of privilege and prejudice in which 'we' are seen as the discriminated and those in power are exposed as a liberal elite of 'do-gooders' who have little understanding of the everyday worlds of ordinary people (Pilkington 2016: 228).

In the case of numerous studies on Islamist extremism, the relationship between inequality and radicalisation is inverted. Terrorist events, and the perception of Muslims as perpetrators of them, act as a source of social vulnerability for Muslim populations, leading to, or embedding, discrimination and inequality. Indeed, one of the strongest associations encountered in the body of texts studied is that terrorism and counter-terrorism are a particular burden for (non-radicalised) Muslim populations in the West, leading to – among other things – an increase in social vulnerability. Terrorist events are shown to have a major and direct impact on Muslims' experience in Western countries and consequently on their economic status and sense of injustice. The numerous studies which develop this perspective emphasise, in different ways, and from different perspectives and experiences, the social burden of terrorism and counter-terrorism for Muslims. They draw attention to the acute social vulnerability of Muslims in many societies since 9/11 and, in some cases, following the implementation of counter-terrorism policies. In the wake of this argument, the MES revealed a discrete line of argument that identified a vicious circle in which social inequality and radicalisation are co-produced through processes of stigmatisation and exclusion. A shared interpretation among a number of studies is that the process of stigmatisation of Muslims impacts negatively on their sense of belonging to their country of residence and may engender forms of radicalisation. In other words, the sense of exclusion of Muslims from citizenship in Western societies – as a result of stigmatisation and discrimination following terrorist acts and targeting of Muslim communities through counter-terrorism policies – strengthens adherence to Islam and susceptibility to radicalisation. This vicious circle may develop in relation not only to terrorism but to religious extremism more widely (Abbas and Siddique 2012; Ahmed 2016; Coolsaet 2017). However, this causal chain is far from systematically repeated and, as noted in the discussion above, a number of studies point to outcomes other than radicalisation, especially resistance and resilience of people facing calls to radicalisation (Hussain and Bagguley 2013) or agency and creative responses to the challenges faced (Abbas and Siddique 2012; Bonino 2015).

While a less developed line of argument arising from the literature, some studies of the extreme right also point to the vicious circle between stigmatisation, social exclusion and radicalisation. Blee's (2002: 9)

study of women activists in a range of extreme-right and white supremacist movements in the United States documents evidence that socio-economic disadvantage was a consequence rather than the cause of radicalisation in some cases. This finding is also identified in Pilkington's (2016) study of English Defence League (EDL) activists. Similarly, Van der Valk and Wagenaar (2010: 28–29) noted that even though former extreme-right radicals in the Netherlands generally continued to work in the same sector, they experienced problems at work after moving away from the extreme right 'because their right-wing extremist activities somehow became known through an internet publication, for example, or because of publicity after arrest' (ibid.). A sense of injustice due to discriminatory treatment by employers on grounds of their political views has been found across extreme-right milieus in more recent studies too (see Pilkington and Vestel, this volume). It is notable that studies of radicalisation tend to call for the decentering of the debate away from ideology and/or religion when discussing Islam and Muslims, while, when focused on the extreme right, they call for greater attention to the views of extreme-right supporters or activists.

### *Indirect Relationships between Inequality and Radicalisation*

A clear line of argument emerging from the MES is that a relationship between inequality and radicalisation exists but is mediated by intervening factors or variables. This is underpinned by the general position that radicalisation is caused by a complex and individually specific set of factors. For instance, the importance of understanding the socio-economic situation of an individual or a group in combination with individual life experiences is noted by Botha (2015) in a study of four radical organisations in Kenya and Uganda. This author argues that it is a combination of factors that explains radicalisation trajectories and this combination will differ from person to person. For Botha, socio-economic trends may be important in encouraging radicalisation, especially where there are 'economic disparities within identifiable ethnic, religious and geographic groups' (ibid.: 12). In this line of argument, it is notable that all authors emphasise that it is subjectively experienced inequality that is at play here and that radicalisation is the outcome of the accumulation of drivers. However, a number of key concepts capturing mediating factors can be discerned and are found in studies of both Islamist and extreme-right radicalisation.

Some authors, for example, understand poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion as potentially facilitating the radicalisation process but see other factors, such as social ties, as more significant in radicalisation

trajectories (Sageman 2004: 121–30; Ahmad 2014, 2016). Hegghammer (2010: 236) also finds in-group loyalty to be more important than ideological factors in the recruitment of Saudi jihadists. Of those recruited between 1996 and 2001, he argues, many were linked by kinship or friendship to other militants (*ibid.*: 130), while later (post-2001) recruits often emerged from jihadi social networks to which former fighters in Afghanistan turned after feeling betrayed by the state and society (often experiencing arrest and interrogation) after return from Afghanistan (*ibid.*: 190).

Studies of extreme-right radicalisation also point to the centrality of social ties in recruitment. Blee's (2002: 28) study of female participants in a range of white supremacist, neo-Nazi and skinhead groups in the United States demonstrated that women get involved through personal contacts and become racist as a consequence of associating with members of racist groups rather than joining racist groups because they are racist (that is, for ideological reasons) or for structural reasons.

There is also significant evidence that space or, more accurately, milieu mediates socio-economic inequality in driving extreme-right radicalisation. Miller-Idriss (2009: 100–101), for example, identifies the milieu of young working-class people to be a crucial factor in determining trajectories into support for the extreme right, with particular districts in Berlin being 'renowned for the highly visible right-wing extremist youth who live and hang out among the housing complexes in the neighbourhood'.

Another driving factor in the relationship between inequality and radicalisation for both Islamist and right-wing extremism is gender (Aslam 2014; Speckhard 2017). For example, in the Pakistan context, Aslam (2014: 148) suggests that 'poverty jeopardises masculine honour at a subjective level' and may lead individuals to seek to regain their position in the gender order through 'acts of violence that are culturally perceived as normative performances of the masculine'.

Jensen et al. (2016: 68) suggest inequality in material terms is never the sole driver of radicalisation but is always accompanied by other factors such as a personal or community crisis, psychological vulnerability and so on. Cragin et al. (2015: 5) also posit the feeling of 'despair' as an important affective dimension of material circumstance or disadvantage that potentially contributes to radicalisation; while despair among members of Hamas and Fatah does not lead to radicalisation on its own, it can reinforce revolutionary tendencies in as much as it causes individuals to subjugate their identity to that of the group. We might understand conversion to jihadist Islam in prison as similarly indicating the role of personal crisis in guiding individuals towards a radicalisation pathway (Sporton, Valentine and Bang Nielsen 2006: 215; see also Conti, this volume).



Studies of young people supporting extreme-right views or active in extreme-right movements confirm the consistent importance of personal trauma. Gabriel's (2014: 36) study of twenty-six young people expressing racist attitudes and behavioural dispositions in Switzerland led to the conclusion that 'social marginality' is less influential than 'deprivation or disintegration as a result of domestic violence and parental conflicts' in leading to such outcomes. This study also identified a strong 'culture of non-attention' among families, which has an effect on the biographies of right-wing actors (see also Pilkington, this volume). Among racist Russian skinheads, a sense of parental abandonment was also expressed by respondents, who felt that 'parents have given up caring' about their children (Pilkington, Omel'chenko and Garifzianova 2010: 49). This cultural disposition was aggravated by early mortality, especially of men in the region, leading to many young people experiencing the loss of fathers at a young age (*ibid.*: 50). Of Kimmel's (2014: 71) sample of former neo-Nazi skinheads in Scandinavia, 'all but one' had experienced bullying in school, while a number of respondents in Pilkington's (2016: 69) study of EDL activists also recounted experiences of bullying. In the latter study, many trajectories into the movement included childhood trauma, and it was rare to find family contexts described as stable, strong or protective (*ibid.*: 80).

Finally, the failure of mainstream political parties (Garland and Treadwell 2010, 2012; Rhodes 2010, 2011) or the lack of power-sharing institutions (Bunte and Vinson 2016) to address inequality and the resentment associated with low economic positions may transform poverty, marginalisation or deprivation into push factors of radicalisation. Ford and Goodwin (2014: 243, 249–50) characterise support for UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) as 'heavily concentrated among older, blue-collar workers with little education and few skills', which, they say, are groups who have been left behind by the economic and social transformation of Britain and who have lost faith in the ability of traditional politics to solve their everyday problems. However, it is important to recognise that the inequality experienced is not only socio-economic; it is also socio-political. The formal political realm is experienced as one of 'silencing' of the voices of the 'white working class', policed, according to Pilkington's (2016: 204–14) respondents, by the application of the 'racism label' with the aim of teaching those with, what are judged to be, unacceptable views to 'keep their mouth shut'. Among respondents in Pilkington's (*ibid.*: 210) study, there is an active disavowal of the formal political sphere. The 'political class', respondents believe (and regardless of party affiliation), are 'just do-gooders' who 'act like ... everything's for the people when nothing is' (*ibid.*: 175). This potentially fuels radicalisation trajectories in that

those who feel silenced reject formal politics as the 'politics of talk' in favour of a 'not-politics of action' (ibid.: 210; Pilkington, Omel'chenko and Garifzianova 2010: 102). Similar recognition of the silencing of the expression of national pride is identified by Miller-Idriss (2009) as crucial to the rise of popular support for the right wing among working-class youth.

### *A Contested Relationship between Inequality and Radicalisation*

In the analysed studies, a third line of argument refutes the idea that either objective, material inequality or subjective socio-economic grievances lead to violent extremism. Although none of the authors included in our corpus denies the (potential) role played by socio-economic inequality in the radicalisation process, all suggest that less centrality should be given to it and propose different readings of the interplay between religion, ideology, poverty and radicalisation. In explaining radicalisation, a significant proportion of the analysed texts discuss a number of alternative drivers including: a quest for adventure or attraction to the 'buzz' of violence; the search for status and meaning; ideology (including racism, Islamophobia and jihadist religio-politics); religious duty; feelings of belonging, companionship and loyalty; family or peer socialisation; subcultural 'cool' or trend; and social environment or milieu. The range of issues and factors considered in the analysed studies should alert us to the importance of not artificially opposing different positions and of understanding radicalisation in a holistic way.

That radicalisation is not solely characteristic of the socio-economically disadvantaged is, of course, old news; this was, in fact, the conventional wisdom especially through the 1980s and 1990s. Basra, Neumann and Brunner (2016: 13), for example, note that Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim established in the early 1980s that a high proportion of imprisoned Egyptian Islamists were engineers and doctors from well-to-do families. Hegghammer's (2010: 242) study of three waves of Saudi jihadists (drawing on a total of 539 biographies) also shows that Al Qaeda recruits were generally better educated than the national male average and 'were neither losers nor disgruntled graduates nor ideologically driven rich kids' (ibid.: 130). Sageman (2004: 75) also challenges the notion that poverty engenders terrorism by pointing to evidence that three-quarters of the global Salafist *mujahedin* were upper or middle class. Sageman also found his sample to be well educated (40% were college-educated), socio-economically aspirational, globally connected and multilingual (ibid.: 77).

Research on more recently radicalised individuals points in the same direction, as shown in the studies conducted by the Centre for Prevention of Radicalisation Leading to Violence (CPRLV 2015, 2016), which

highlight the diversity of profiles of young radicalised women in Quebec in terms of education, life history, psychological antecedents, family history and environments as well as level of social integration. In the same vein, Dawson, Amarasingam and Bain (2016: 38) find little reference to material deprivation in the previous lives of foreign fighters, concluding that 'pull factors' such as ideology, narrative, ideas and religiosity are relatively more important in journeys to radicalisation than material factors.

Studies of the extreme right also find 'no evidence that "right-wing actors" come from "socially disadvantaged groups"' (Gabriel 2014: 44). Gabriel finds that young people with extreme-right trajectories come from 'all social strata, though mainly from lower middle-class families' and do not suffer from social exclusion or social deprivation. Blee's (2002: 8) study of female extreme-right activists in the United States also challenges the 'common stereotypes about racist women as uneducated, marginal members of society raised in terrible families and lured into racist groups by boyfriends and husbands'. On the contrary, she argues, most were not poor, were educated and had good jobs (ibid.: 9).

Finally, the shared interpretation of authors adopting a critical line of argument is that socio-economic factors may be present but not determining in radicalisation. Hegghammer (2010: 133) suggests that it is very difficult to pinpoint socio-economic factors with a strong predictive value for individual Saudi recruitment to Al Qaeda. Speckhard (2017: 13) also recognises that particular forms of inequalities, such as high unemployment and material benefits, play a significant role in pathways to radicalisation among Kosovan women travelling to Syria to join ISIS, but argues that such inequalities alone do not provide sufficient explanation.

With regard to right-wing extremism, Gabriel (2014: 45) concludes that 'macro-sociological explanations of right-wing extremism alone are too narrow' and that 'even if we accept that socio-structural conditions have considerable influence, a large measure of autonomy remains'. Pilkington (2016: 154) also suggests that part of the problem lies in a limited understanding of inequality, which is manifest not only in individual social and economic profiles or backgrounds but also in community fragmentation, loss of meaning and the fracturing of individuals' sense of self which can lead to resignation, shame and fear but also resentment and resistance.

### ***Inequality-Radicalisation/Terrorism Relationship from a Quantitative Perspective***

In our SR of quantitative studies, we sought to establish whether or not there was an association between inequality and radicalisation and, if so, how, when and where it was present and how it might be explained.

Whether such associations can be established or not, our findings suggest, depends on a number of factors including: whether we are interested in the relationship between inequality and radicalisation at an individual level, or inequality and terrorism at a social level; concrete type, dimensions and indicators of inequality used (economic or socio-political, objective or more subjective inequality); context (socio-political, demographic, geographical, whether countries have majority Muslim populations, USA, Western Europe); or point in the radicalisation process (cognitive or behavioural radicalisation). Below, we summarise the main findings of the reviewed studies in relation to these key factors.

### *Is Economic Inequality Related to Radicalisation and Terrorism?*

Within the thirty-six analysed studies relevant for understanding the role of objective economic inequality at an individual level, objective economic inequality is frequently operationalised as educational level, personal income or poverty and, less often, as job status or social class. Findings did not support any firm conclusion regarding a relationship between such objective economic inequality indicators and a cognitive Islamist radicalisation in the context of Muslim majority countries. For example, regarding education, in some studies, more support for radicalised attitudes (e.g. support for suicide bombing or confidence in bin Laden) was characteristic for the less-educated (e.g. Fair, Hamza and Heller 2017). In other studies or countries, this was found to be more likely among the more educated (e.g. Cherney and Povey 2013). In some cases, even in the same study, education was differently related to different radicalised beliefs (e.g. Muluk, Sumaktoyo and Ruth 2013). Thus, the relationship between individual education, income, poverty and Islamic radicalisation in Muslim majority countries probably depends on a combination of individual characteristics (e.g. a combination of higher education and poverty) or on some contextual characteristics (e.g. concrete country or poverty or violence in a district). In contrast, in the case of the fifteen analysed studies focusing on behavioural radicalisation, studies analysing the characteristics of terrorists generally indicate that participation in an Islamist terrorist group is more likely for more educated individuals (e.g. Berrebi 2007; Fair 2014). However, this relationship may depend on other individual factors, such as the role of the individual in the terrorist group, their direct participation in violence (or not) and type of violence (Perliger, Koehler-Derrick and Pedahzur 2016), as well as contextual characteristics such as poverty at an individual and district level (e.g. Kavanagh 2011; Saeed and Syed 2018). In the context

of Western European countries, notwithstanding all the obstacles and limitations of studies of radicalised individuals, data generally suggest that Islamist radicalisation is more likely among the less educated and persons from a lower economic status (e.g. Bakker 2006; Bakker and de Bont 2016; Ljujic, van Prooijen and Weerman 2017; PROTON 2017; Reynolds and Hafez 2017).

In the case of the eighty-four analysed terrorism studies, when investigating the inequality-terrorism relationship at the societal level, economic inequality was studied using indicators related to poverty, income inequality and the country's economic development (e.g. GDP p.c., HDI, unemployment rates). The findings suggest that the relationship between indicators such as poverty and income inequality and terrorism are inconsistent, with two exceptions: higher poverty was consistently related to a higher incidence of transnational terrorism; and higher interregional inequality seems to be related to a higher incidence of domestic terrorism. The findings regarding national economic development were similar. With regard to domestic and transnational terrorism, there is an inconsistent tendency for higher GDP p.c. to be associated with higher incidence of attacks. However, more advanced studies indicate that countries with a low and those with a high GDP p.c. tend to have a lower incidence of terrorism than countries with an average GDP p.c. Regarding unemployment rates, results generally confirm the importance of inequality since the probability of general terrorism attacks is higher for countries with higher unemployment rates. Findings regarding other economic development indicators were inconsistent. Moreover, the robustness of all these conclusions may be questionable due to the scarcity of empirical findings.

Subjective economic inequality (e.g. income dissatisfaction, perceived individual poverty or unemployment worry, economic status) is less frequently investigated as a determinant of Islamist cognitive radicalisation than objective economic inequality. Generally, in the context of Muslim majority countries, perceived economic inequality is not related to cognitive Islamist radicalisation, although the results are not completely consistent (e.g. Ciftci, O'Donnell and Tanner 2017; Fair, Hamza and Heller 2017). Moreover, one experimental study (in the context of Pakistan) demonstrates that perceived individual poverty lowers the likelihood of cognitive Islamist radicalisation, especially in combination with the perception of a high level of violence in the country (Fair et al. 2018). In the context of Western European countries, those – rare – studies including subjective economic inequality provided inconsistent results (Deckard and Jacobson 2015; Berger 2016).

### *Is Socio-Political Inequality Related to Radicalisation and Terrorism?*

At an individual level, the twenty-six detected findings on the relationship between cognitive radicalisation and perceived socio-political inequality (e.g. personal or group deprivation, unfair treatment, discrimination) are generally more consistent than is the case for economic inequality. Namely, regardless of the ideological base of radicalisation and context, individuals perceiving themselves or their group as more deprived and in an unjust position were more likely to exhibit more radicalised responses in conducted surveys. Such a positive relationship between perceived socio-political inequality and Islamist cognitive radicalisation is suggested by studies in the context of Muslim majority countries (e.g. Fischer et al. 2008; Tausch et al. 2011; Muluk, Sumaktoyo and Ruth 2013) and in the European context (e.g. Tausch et al. 2011; Doosje, Loseman and Van Den Bos 2013; Schils and Pauwels 2016). The few studies of extreme-right radicalisation in the Western European context also point to a positive relationship between perceived social inequality and cognitive radicalisation (Doosje et al. 2012; Pauwels and De Waele 2014; Pauwels and Heylen 2017). However, these studies are mainly based on multi-item reliable measures of radicalisation and inequality and frequently use more advanced statistical analyses, which may explain why more consistent results were obtained.

In the case of analysed terrorism studies, socio-political inequality was investigated through indicators such as democracy (most often, i.e., fifty-two findings detected among the eighty-four analysed studies), respect for physical integrity rights (thirty findings detected) or gender equality (eight findings detected). Although it seems that a higher level of democracy is related to a higher incidence of terrorist attacks, studies also indicate a higher incidence of terrorism in countries with a medium level of democracy. In the case of repression, as well as respect for physical integrity rights, a small number of studies indicate that a higher incidence of general or domestic terrorism is more characteristic for countries with a higher level of repression and lower respect for physical integrity rights. Findings regarding respect for civil rights and liberties are inconsistent, while results give a modest indication of a higher level of gender equality being related to lower terrorism incidence at the general and transnational level, but not at the domestic level. Altogether, it seems that suppression of rights (civil rights and liberties, physical integrity rights, women's rights) is related to higher terrorism rates.

### *Where, When and How is Inequality Related to Radicalisation?*

Only a few of the analysed quantitative studies explored whether the inequality-radicalisation relationship depends on some additional indi-

vidual or contextual factors. Results of some studies indicate the possible importance of the combined effect (interaction) of two specific inequality indicators (e.g. poverty/income and education) (Chiozza 2009; Kavanagh 2011; Saeed and Syed 2018). Other studies suggested the importance of different contextual factors such as level of urbanisation or level of violence (Mousseau 2011; Fair et al. 2018). Mousseau (2011) demonstrates that poverty is accompanied by higher support for Islamist terrorism only in urban areas, while findings from Pakistan indicate that the presence of violence caused by militant organisations in combination with individual-level poverty reduces support for violent groups (Blair et al. 2013; Fair et al. 2018). These findings could also explain the previously mentioned interactive relationship between poverty and level of urbanisation (Mousseau 2011) since violence may be more concentrated in urban areas.

Some studies of macro-level determinants of terrorism demonstrate that the relationship between economic development and terrorism may also depend on additional markers of inequality or other contextual factors. For instance, Ghatak and Gold (2017) demonstrated that only in countries with a high GDP p.c. did the rate of an excluded population relate to the rising number of terrorist attacks, while no relationship between an excluded population and terrorism was found in countries with a low GDP p.c. There have been some indications also that the relationship between GDP and terrorism depends on the type of government – democracy or autocracy (Piazza 2013; Nemeth, Mauslein and Stapley 2014) – or may have a different direction of association (positive or negative) in low- compared to high-income groups of countries (Enders and Hoover 2012). Democracy also appears to interact with heterogeneity costs.<sup>2</sup> In immature democracies, higher heterogeneity costs were related to higher rates of terrorism, while this relationship was much less consistent in autocracies and completely developed democracies (Ghatak 2016b). Moreover, Brockhoff, Krieger and Meierrieks (2015) found that a more democratic government was related to a higher incidence of domestic terrorism in less developed countries but a lower incidence of domestic attacks in more developed countries. Further, Ghatak (2016a) revealed that in weak democracies, the predicted number of terrorist attacks sharply grew as the percentage of excluded population increased, which was not found in other regimes. Similarly, Choi and Piazza (2016a) specified the relevance of both political rights and political discrimination in predicting terrorism.

Regarding the question of *how* inequality is related to radicalisation, only a small number of analysed studies provide relevant findings which could explain the relationship between some of the inequality measures and radicalisation. For now, it seems that a positive relationship between perceived social inequality and Islamist or extreme-right radicalisation

could be explained by a different social-psychological process related to ideological attitudes (like fundamentalist religiosity in the case of Islamist radicalisation or authoritarianism in the case of extreme-right radicalisation), intergroup attitudes and emotions (like perceived group threat) or an aspect of social identity (like in-group superiority) (Tausch et al. 2011; Doosje et al. 2012; Doosje, Loseman and Van Den Bos 2013; Schils and Pauwels 2016).

At the macro level, rare studies suggest that increasing socio-political inequality (worsening of physical integrity or human rights) can increase suicide terrorism or lead to popular grievances, which help fuel terrorist campaigns (Choi and Piazza 2016b; Piazza 2016).

## Conclusions

The syntheses of findings from quantitative and qualitative research studies generated important insights into the relationship between inequality and radicalisation that either confirm or supplement each other.

The important insight based on analyses of qualitative studies is the identification of a bi-directional relationship between inequality and radicalisation. On the one hand, as is often presumed, inequality produces radicalisation. On the other hand, however, radicalisation also plays a role in producing inequality (or injustice/discrimination). Poverty, marginalisation, deprivation, low economic backgrounds and/or discrimination and perceived injustice at the societal and/or personal level are understood as contributing in varying degrees to radicalisation or as resulting from radicalisation.

A second insight concerns the tension between objective and subjective dimensions of inequality – both of which may lead individuals to follow a radicalisation pathway. The synthesis of qualitative studies suggests that the subjective meanings of inequality – that is, the perception of being disadvantageously positioned in relations of power, regardless of whether this is associated with an objective situation or not – supersede the objective variables of inequality in triggering a path towards radicalisation. Likewise, the SR of quantitative studies suggests that perceived socio-political inequality could be more important than economic inequality in understanding the drivers of radicalisation and terrorism. On a general level, these findings are in accordance with the most recent systematic review findings (Wolfowicz et al. 2020; Jahnke, Abad Borger and Beelmann 2022). Wolfowicz et al. (2020), for example, have shown that variables we considered as relevant for objective economic inequality (e.g. being unemployed or welfare recipient) are in the group of risk



factors with the smallest effects on radical attitudes and intentions. At the same time, indicators relevant for perceived socio-political inequality (e.g. perceived injustice, relative deprivation) were confirmed as factors with slightly more substantial impact on radical attitudes and intentions. Similarly, recent meta-analysis of predictors of political violence outcomes among young people revealed group relative deprivation as one of the factors consistently linked to political violence outcomes (Jahnke, Abad Borger and Beelmann 2022).

Since subjective inequality and perceived injustice are confirmed as potential motivators of political or collective action in general in the social science literature, future studies could further clarify the potential importance of perceived injustice in the context of differentiation of radicalisation from other forms of political and collective action. Considering that socio-political inequality could be more important than economic inequality, policymakers should invest additional efforts to prevent the potential for existing policies and measures, aimed at increasing safety and lowering the risk of radicalisation and terrorism, to backfire by increasing perceived injustice and discrimination among relevant populations. Moreover, both syntheses revealed that a relationship between subjective inequality and radicalisation exists and is probably complex.

From the qualitative perspective, the demonstrated difference in the importance of subjective and objective inequality raises the question of whether, and how, objective economic inequality interacts with a sense of injustice in the production of radicalisation pathways. It also warns against the tendency to reify the link between social inequality, religion and radicalisation. The intertwining of social exclusion, religion and radicalisation could undermine the treatment of important social issues for affected populations (such as discrimination, racism, inequality) and risk reducing any social issues concerning Muslim populations to the problem of radicalisation. The weight attached to subjective experiences of injustice in the qualitative studies also points to the fact that radicalisation is more similar to a process than a state. Each experience of injustice is reflected, interpreted and potentially mobilised via a multiplicity of other factors, including socio-economic situation, personal background, family ties and national context. In the case of the qualitative studies, the mosaic of composite findings that emerges underlines a set of contrasts that tends to bring into tension different perspectives regarding the causes of radicalisation.

From the quantitative perspective, the complexity of the relationship between inequality and radicalisation or terrorism is demonstrated by findings that the inequality-radicalisation relationship could be conditional on some other individual or contextual (macro) factor. Moreover,

more sophisticated survey studies indicate that the relationship between perceived inequality and radicalisation could be explained by a different socio-psychological process related to ideological attitudes, intergroup attitudes and emotions and aspects of social identity. At the same time, some of the terrorism studies indicated that testing the non-linear relations between inequality on the societal level and terrorism might offer a more useful way forward than studying linear relationships.

This leads naturally to general insights from both the SR and MES, namely that the link between inequality and radicalisation is context dependent, if not case-by-case dependent. The importance of context identified in the SR is extended by the findings of the MES that suggest that inequality (poverty, marginalisation, disenfranchisement etc.) at the level of individual experience not only fails to consistently explain radicalisation, but that feelings of victimisation and injustice that steer people down a radicalisation path may be formed not at the level of experience at all, but be part of a subjective reality forged 'in the realm of imaginary' of individuals and groups (Khosrokhavar 2018).

In interpreting insights and conclusions of both reviews, it should be noted that they represent 'informed' assumptions rather than firm causal conclusions. Namely, the type of evidence we investigated (primarily descriptive or correlational studies) prevents any firm causal conclusions. Thus, for enhancing understanding of the inequality-radicalisation relationship, the challenges for future studies are to get as close as possible to the subjectivities of actors (in the case of a qualitative approach) and to explore the inequality-radicalisation relationship using experimental and longitudinal research designs (in the case of a quantitative approach). Integration of findings of experimental or longitudinal research designs with insights from in-depth interviews could serve as a basis for valid causal conclusions by comparing, for instance, the general evolution of conceptions of social justice in different types of society with the individual approach of feelings of injustice. These orientations could constitute a starting point for the development of models of radicalisation and deradicalisation which highlight the nexus between political and social inequality beyond the prism of relative frustration.

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**NOTES**

1. For a complete description of the search flow, see Figure 1 in Franc and Pavlović 2018, 2021.
2. Heterogeneity costs represent deprivation of a minority group from public goods due to ideological or physical differences from the majority group ('the ruling elite'), and were operationalised by combining the heterogeneity index of a country and economic discrimination (Ghatak 2016b).

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